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Lifelong learning of gypsy women in Spain

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Abstract

From a very early age, a gypsy woman receives a type of education that differentiates her from men and from other women who do not belong to her culture. The transmission of their culture depends in large measure on the women who create and form part of their own homes. Academic learning in gypsy women is often despised, since it could be an obstacle in her relationship with her husband; in any case, it is not considered to be of any use to her, except for work such as itinerant peddling.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, women, gypsy, education;

1. Introduction

When the gypsy community arrived in Spain in the fifteenth century, it adapted to the host community and at the same time influenced it with the very different customs they brought with them. Throughout history, the gypsy ethnic group has encountered serious restrictions and countless rejections: social exclusion, difficulties entering the labor market, problems gaining access to basic necessities, not to mention severe repression, even by the law. They make up a stereotypical minority, and many families have found themselves in a precarious situation and socially vulnerable (Cruz Diaz, R., 2003).

In view of this situation, numerous initiatives are being implemented aimed at guaranteeing this group's access to the welfare state, making not only material goods and essentials available to them, but also educational resources. At the same time, policies are being carried out to fully integrate the gypsy community into society (Plan de acción para el desarrollo de la población gitana, 2010–2012) [Action Plan for the Development of the Gypsy Population, 2010–2012].

The majority of gypsies have a low level of education, which is a stumbling block to finding a job, and lack educational competencies, mainly as the result of truancy or dropping out of school early. This affects gypsy girls to a larger extent, since they are more likely than boys to drop out early (Proyecto de Promoción de la Salud en la Comunidad Gitana, 2007, p. 4) [Project for the Promotion of Health in the Gypsy Community, 2007, p.4].

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Nevertheless, we should point out that, as a result of the Action Plan for the Development of the Gypsy Population, almost all gypsy girls and boys of infant and primary school age have been attending school in recent decades; one consequence of this is that their parents now consider school attendance necessary. However, similar results have not yet been attained in secondary education since gypsy pupils frequently drop out of school, and as only a tiny minority of them go on to higher education, very few have university level studies.

Our study concentrates on the field of education, particularly the educational situation of women in this culture.

2. Gypsy Women

Traditionally, the gypsy woman has taken a background role—subordinate to the figure of the man as “breadwinner”—“shut away” in the family home. From childhood, she has responsibilities imposed on her that limit her all-round development as a person, since according to their own law, she is born to be a mother and to take charge of the family’s upbringing and pass on their culture. The gypsy woman plays a crucial role in her family, even though she has a subordinate role to the man: “*the girl is always brought up to help her mother and to obey her father*” (Moro da Dalt, L., 2009, p. 79).

We should emphasize that the women in this ethnic group play very important roles in the family home and in their children’s upbringing, since they are responsible for the safekeeping and care of their family. The functions carried out by women are confined to the private sphere, looking after their husbands, parents, in-laws and their children. When they are still children, they are assigned tasks associated with caring for their younger siblings and doing a few chores, which is why a woman’s commitment to housework begins at a very early age, cleaning the house and looking after younger brothers and sisters (Camacho, J.M., 2003, p. 4–5).

Most gypsy women marry very young, have their babies at an early age and, by dropping out of formal education, simultaneously give up preparing themselves for a job. Many of them not only have the obligation and duty of attending to their homes, but they are also forced to join the job market. However, because of their poor preparation, they have to accept precarious conditions and low wages.

In spite of this, these women do not complain about their status; their desire is to improve their quality of life by pursuing their own individual and collective emancipation. At the same time, their intention is to advance to greater levels of freedom not by opposing the males of their ethnic group nor even to eliminate family values, but to achieve progress by accepting their roles and circumstances as members of the gypsy culture (Rey, F. 2009, p. 5), while also creating contexts in which their figure and identity are recognized without the slightest discrimination.

So, we see then that young gypsy women are fighting for the same equality of rights and conditions that other women of today enjoy, realizing that irrespective of the particular culture they belong to, they are women and should therefore make the most of the advantages offered to them, without having to renounce their social identity (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2009, p.11) [Gypsy Secretariat Foundation, 2009, p. 11]. Likewise, the struggle for self-improvement is being supported by a great many associations, among them the *Asociación de Mujeres Gitanas Romí* [Association of Roma Gypsy Women], which advocates breaking with the old norms about the behavior of these women and their function as such, and promotes sharing rights with women from other cultures that are different from their own (Fernández F., 2011).

These associations play a very important role in society, forming part of the feminist struggle for equal rights and serving as a stimulus to gypsy women. In the area of education, young women increasingly have to continue with their studies despite the obstacles placed in their way. Most of these young women are pioneers of a life style that is unknown in their social environment. This process of transformation in their customs is often criticized and questioned by family and friends; however, in response to this situation, associations of gypsy women are there to support such initiatives and bring pressure to bear on the various families and community groups (Abajo, J.E. et al.,

2004, p. 121). We should also add the famous “association phenomenon,” a social movement led by Roma women who have promoted the struggle for transformation and occupy prestigious positions in today’s society, contributing to the improvement in living conditions of the Roma people and furthering interculturality (Gypsy Secretariat Foundation, 2009, p. 12).

3. Lifelong Learning of Gypsy Women

From the moment women are born into the gypsy community, they are stereotyped and assigned roles and duties that differentiate them from men, who occupy a privileged position within the family. For the majority of gypsy girls, childhood is relatively short, as they are brought up to look after children, in this case their brothers and sisters, and to help with the household chores from an early age. At the same time, they are influenced by beliefs, customs, ideas, behaviors and roles specific to the female gender, and these tasks take priority over school work. On the other hand, gypsy boys receive constant support to begin school, enabling them to enjoy their childhood to the full.

During puberty, a gypsy girl is mostly groomed and educated for marriage, to care for and respect her future husband; it is a stage when she will go from being controlled by her own family to being controlled by her husband and his family. In the transition from puberty to marriage, a young woman is dependent on and under the control of her own family, with constant restrictions on her relations with young men except at family events. The control is tighter after menarche (the first menstruation), which is a time of high risk and requires greater vigilance and care. The gypsy woman’s virginity has to be preserved until her marriage as proof of family respect and honor.

In spite of all this, we should point out that, nowadays, it tends to be the norm for gypsy boys and girls to attend school during the compulsory stage of education, although they rarely stay on afterwards. So, if we look at the data from a study about the attendance and track record of gypsy girls in compulsory secondary education (ESO), we see that 90.76% of pupils from a gypsy background have attended school and, with reference to the family, the same study also reveals that 85% of families decide for themselves to send their children to school with no influence from external support groups (Andrés, M^a T. et al., 2011, p. 16), which leads to the conclusion that the family is increasingly aware of the importance of formal education for their sons and daughters. Continuing in the same vein, the study demonstrates one clear difference between the educational processes of girls and boys by highlighting the fact that girls obtain better results than boys because “*they are less disruptive, accept their responsibilities in education, behave appropriately and correctly towards others, etc.*”

More and more girls are continuing their education at secondary level and progressing onwards to further and higher education. At university, they tend to choose courses related to the human, social and health sciences, with some infrequent cases of degrees in engineering or information technology. Boys tend to finish their school process in the intermediate or upper cycles of courses related to building, engineering or information technology. On the other hand, the minority who go to university take courses in business studies, law, engineering, and to a lesser extent, the human sciences (Andrés, M^a T. et al, 2011, p. 18).

In response to the frequent truancy among the gypsy population, the Educational and Social Services are beginning to provide assistance and support (socioeducational or compensatory projects) aimed at complementing the work of the teachers by training them in everything related to gypsy culture (General Gypsy Secretariat Foundation, 2002, p. 26). There are likewise many associations working to improve the educational level of gypsy boys and girls, and so contributing to the decline in truancy. Among them, we should like to make special mention of the Federación Andaluza de Mujeres Gitanas (Fakali) [Andalusian Federation of Gypsy Women], which proposes and implements educational projects in schools with the aim of designing adaptations of the curriculum to suit gypsy pupils. They also devise programs for reinforcing educational resources. At the same time, with a view to reducing or eradicating truancy, they are launching training courses for teaching staff about gypsy culture, and programs to raise awareness among gypsy families of the importance of sending their young children and teenagers to school.

With the intention of increasing the presence of this ethnic minority in higher education, this association also gathers and provides information about funds and grants available to boys and girls from the gypsy culture to enable them to benefit from education at that level.

However, we should not only talk about infant, primary and secondary schooling; it is also important for Roma adults to confront illiteracy and make their way in society as citizens with basic education and skills which will help improve their quality of life. So, together with the Fakali association, there is also the Association of Gypsy Women of Andalusia (AMURADI), which focuses, among other things, on the education of gypsy women, and their involvement and participation in society. Through workshops and courses, they are taught skills or helped to consolidate them so that they can cope in society and find work in the future.

We should also mention the work of the Association of ROMI Gypsy Women which, like the others, devises programs for preventing, monitoring and controlling truancy, for example, as well as projects ensuring the lifelong learning of adult women and their presence in Adult Secondary education.

4. Conclusions

One of the commonest errors is to make generalizations about the gypsy community. Stereotypes of gypsy women distance us from a reality in which a variety of gypsy groups exist, all with different customs, habits and needs, and even in the same group, there are women with different attitudes, education and outlooks. Such stereotypes have an adverse effect on the welfare of gypsy women, because they lead to prejudices against them. Think of the difficulties many gypsy women face when they are looking for a job.

The state of exclusion in which the gypsy community has lived throughout history has been changing over the past few decades, as a result of the impetus of various projects and plans that have led to this culture gaining social recognition, and therefore, support in helping them overcome discrimination.

Many associations have been creating initiatives for recognizing the Roma community, and specifically ones that support the progress of gypsy women in society. Nevertheless, we must also emphasize the many gypsy women's movements that are achieving objectives concerned with educating women, seeking their freedom and the realization of their dreams.

As we have already said, women are increasingly being integrated into society because they have been to school. School, along with various collaborative associations, plays a fundamental role in integrating gypsy girls and boys into the education system, since it is one of the best ways of transmitting ideas, knowledge and opinions. The school's task is to make different cultures—in this instance, the gypsy culture—known, raising the population's awareness of their values, customs and beliefs, so that they are regarded as enriching the native culture. In this way, exclusion and fear of the unknown are banished.

Most of the gypsies' problems at school stem from being marginalized, because children start work at such an early age, they do not learn certain habits before going to school (tidiness, cleanliness, punctuality and so on), they suffer frequent discrimination at school, and there are differences between what they learn at school and in the home (Elboj Saso, C. and Vicén Ferrando MJ., 2007, pp. 45–73). In present-day society, a premium is placed on academic knowledge and lifelong learning, so that the lack of these leads to groups being marginalized. Gypsy women are excluded on the one hand because they are gypsies and on the other because they are women. For full integration into society, an uninterrupted school education is essential, achieved by reducing the high rates of truancy and school failure. Consequently, if they are successful at school, social exclusion will be largely avoided, which is why we consider it is indispensable to promote and foster the importance of education in the gypsy community.

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